Students as Consumers? A Counter Perspective from Student Assessment as a Disciplinary Technology

Rille Raaper, Durham University

Abstract:

The notion of students as consumers who exercise educational decisions based on economic self-interest leads to interesting questions about their perceptions of current higher education assessment practices. Guided by a Foucauldian theorisation and the findings from focus groups carried out with students from two European universities, one from the UK and another from Estonia, the article argues that globally dominant consumerist policy discourses have altered but not removed the student experience of constraint in assessment. I argue that students' response to disciplinary power in assessment has become highly strategic and differs depending on the institutional assessment systems: students from Estonia recognise the powerful position of academics as assessors and find ways to create a good social impression of themselves; their counterparts from the UK, however, demonstrate a tactical approach to their learning and study processes.

Keywords: higher education, neoliberalism, consumerism, student assessment, discourse analysis

Introduction: a neoliberal positioning of students as consumers

Higher education institutions today exist in a context where market-driven demands and accountability measures are fundamental organising principles of university work (Jankowski and Provezis 2014), promoting competition within and between them. Universities, like other public sector organisations are pressured to become entrepreneurial to ensure their competitiveness in national and global higher education markets (Allen 2011). Foucault (2004) would term this shift towards economic discourses of competition as neoliberalism. Within a neoliberal environment, students are increasingly addressed – both in policy and scholarly discourses – as consumers who practise economic decisions and choose their universities based on league tables that measure teaching and research quality (Pritchard 2005). In the UK setting, for example, the universities are required to comply with consumer law that formalises student-university relations in terms of information provision, terms and conditions, and complaints

handling (CMA 2015). Furthermore, the recent Higher Education and Research Act 2017 in the UK promotes consumer relations between universities and students. In particular, the Act introduces a new quality assurance exercise branded as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which aims to measure teaching quality across universities and to potentially link tuition fee increase with the outcomes of the exercise (Morris 2017). The TEF development has been surrounded by the rhetoric of 'placing students at the centre of higher education' where student is seen as a consumer who engages in a rational financial transaction to develop one's employability (Gourlay and Stevenson 2017, 391). This re-conceptualisation of consumer relations in higher education reflects an assumption that if students act as consumers, they will pressure universities to develop high quality courses and academic practices (Naidoo and Williams 2015).

The phrase 'the student experience' has become particularly dominant in higher education policies over the last decade, and has 'acquired the aura of a sacred utterance' (Sabri 2011, 657). The National Student Survey (NSS) in the UK, for example, evaluates the experiences of final-year undergraduate students and makes the results publicly available ostensibly to inform the choices of future applicants (Naidoo and Williams 2015). No equivalent exists in Estonia, but most universities pay increasing attention to promoting and evaluating student satisfaction at institutional levels, with the aim of promoting competitiveness to recruit more home and international students. The *Internationalisation Strategy 2008-2015* in the Estonian University of this study illustrates the impact neoliberal discourses of competition have on wider institutional policy:

> Adding an international dimension to the curricula and offering the opportunity to study in English undoubtedly increases the attractiveness of the university among local student candidates. These students will be better prepared for a successful career in an integrated European labour market.

Universities, however, not only provide (educational) experience to students or train future workers, but as part of their relationship they shape students' subjectivities: '[their] identities, values, and sense of what it means to become citizens of the world' (Giroux 2009, 460). Student as subject from a Foucauldian perspective is in a constant process of being produced (Butler 1997). There are no 'universal necessities in human nature', only various technologies through which the individual is created or creates him/herself (Besley and Peters 2007, 6). The process of becoming a subject – subjectification – is therefore a never-ending process through which

subject positions are created, negotiated, accepted and transformed (Lehn-Christiansen 2011). Subjectification of students happens through everyday discursive practices in which discourse is a space of positions and functioning for the subjects (Foucault 1972). In this article, discourse is understood as a social practice through which not only meanings but particular student subjectivities are constructed (Fairclough 1992; Graham 2011). It encompasses policy and scholarly discourses that enforce particular subject positions as well as student discourses (created through focus groups in this study) that allow certain subjectivities to be constructed and negotiated. Hay and Kapitzke (2009, 155), for example, argue that neoliberal higher education policy discourses promote 'entrepreneurial citizens' for the competitive global economy. By addressing students as consumers, students are expected to act as 'private investors' who seek a financial return in the form of enhanced employability skills (Naidoo and Williams 2015, 213). This repositioning of students is unsurprising as in the current economic context, university degrees move from being desirable to being a necessity in many fields (Svensson and Wood 2007).

This study does not propose that students necessarily act as consumers but it recognises that the consumerist positioning has been increasingly enforced on students by various policy frameworks, making it an influential discourse worldwide. There is some evidence to suggest that students from the UK in particular have been significantly influenced by a consumerist mind-set. For example, a recent large scale survey led by the Universities UK (2017) suggests that 50% of student participants identified themselves as consumers of higher education. However, the findings also indicated that this consumer relationship in higher education is unique, including trust and collaboration (Universities UK 2017). In critiquing the neoliberal positioning of students as consumers, this article questions the ways in which student subjectivity emerges in assessment situations, a context traditionally characterised by academic domination. The article draws on a small scale exploratory research project involving focus groups with 15 students from two universities: a well-established Russell Group[1] university in the UK and a relatively new university in Estonia. These universities were selected based on their different historical and political backgrounds and diverse assessment systems. Guided by a Foucauldian theorisation of the subject, this study engages with the following research

[1] The Russell Group includes 24 UK universities "which are committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector" (Russell Group, 2015).

questions: a) To what extent does a consumerist positioning of students emerge in assessment situations? b) How do students experience and negotiate power dynamics within different assessment regimes?

Disciplinary power in student assessment

Assessment in its traditional form can be understood as 'a normalising gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish' (Foucault 1975, 184). It enhances students' visibility, helping to differentiate and judge them. From this perspective, academics as assessors are institutional agents with authority to make judgements about learners (Leach, Neutze, and Zepke 2000), and their role is to guard the norms. Disciplinary power is organised around norms (Foucault 1973) which define what 'normal' behaviour is and what one must do. Authority is rooted in the logic of the liberal university that legitimises academic freedom and academics' ownership over their practices (Mampaey and Huisman 2015), particularly judgment in assessment contexts.

Neoliberal policy developments attempt to challenge disciplinary power which exists between teacher and student, and reforms are often justified in terms of professionalisation of assessment (Murphy 2006). For example, the European Association for Quality Assurance (ENQA) emphasises that students should be assessed by published and consistent criteria, regulations and procedures (ENQA 2009). It is therefore unsurprising that this 'professionalisation' priority in assessment has resulted in increased use of criteria and anonymised marking in higher education. Bloxham et al. (2011) argue that it is criterion rather than norm referencing that is now prevalent, and Yorke (2008) explains that anonymised marking is increasingly applied to reduce bias in respect of gender, ethnicity and other demographic characteristics. These reforms can be understood as part of wider attempts to reorganise academic work and create so-called 'managed academics' who rely on standards and performance targets (Fanghanel 2012, 15), and whose assessment practices are constrained by institutional regulations rather than underpinned by pedagogical principles (Raaper 2016, 2017a).

Policy developments on academic practices, however, do not necessarily alter power relations in the classroom (Gipps 1999; Reynolds and Trehan 2000). Both students and staff bring their previously-learned notions of behaviour and power dynamics into assessment situations (Tan 2004). Furthermore, Taras (2008, 83) shows that the power of academics in assessment is crucial as 'the role of the tutor as final arbiter of assessment is often unchallenged'. Power in

assessment not only operates in sovereign forms between assessor and assessed, but exists in less visible forms where assessment practices set expectations for student behaviour in universities and beyond. Becker, Geer and Hughes (1968) conceive grades as personal and institutional currency: a measure of worth to oneself and others. Assessment, then, has a function of 'gate-keeping in terms of enabling or restricting entry into a professional career' (Harman and McDowell 2011, 50), judging whether students are even considered, let alone suitable for a job or a credential (Leach, Neutze, and Zepke 2000). As assessment affects individuals' potential opportunities, careers and feelings of worth, it is unsurprising that students experience it as constraining (Reynolds and Trehan 2000). While recognising disciplinary power in assessment, this research project aimed to explore the impact consumerism has on traditional power relations associated with assessment. It questions whether the freedom that supposedly makes students act as 'potential wealth creator(s)' as Bansel (2014, 8) explained it, also includes opportunities to practise freedom (Foucault 1984, 282) in such disciplinary situations as assessment. This is particularly the case in neoliberal universities, as according to Foucault (2004), the idea of freedom and self-interest are key conditions for the formation of a neoliberal subjectivity of 'homo economicus': the student as a consumer in this article.

Research setting and methodology

This study included two European universities with different historical, political and social backgrounds: a Russell Group university from the UK and a relatively new university from Estonia.

UK University

The UK University is a medieval university that belongs to the prestigious Russell Group universities. The UK University, like most other British higher education institutions, has been affected by increasing bureaucratisation, both in terms of regulating academic practices and managing academics (Barnett 2011). In the UK University, the number of assessment regulations has increased over the past years, resulting in 113 pages of text. The university has an assessment policy and regulations, as well as three guidance and strategic documents accompanying the regulations. All these documents need to be read together to gain a complete understanding of the regulatory context, causing confusion and stress amongst the academics (see Raaper 2017a). As regards practice, the UK University applies anonymised marking based on a 22 point marking scale which encourages detailed differentiation of student performances.

Assessment is often carried out by diverse markers, including casual academic staff who may be employed to teach a number of lectures and seminars on particular courses and/or to carry out some assessments (Evans 2011).

Estonian University

Located in North East Europe, the Estonian University was founded in the 2000s as a result of uniting several higher education institutions in the local area. As a newer university from a post-soviet country[2], neoliberalisation is a more recent process. Until the regaining of independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the higher education sector in Estonia was under direct government control (Unt and Lindemann 2013). Saar and Mõttus (2013, 9) describe the sector as currently undergoing major modernisation, including significant reforms for integrating universities 'into European models and practices of education and research'. These reforms in Estonia, however, conflict with a traditional understanding of academic authority (Tomusk 1996). In terms of assessment regulations, for example, it still has a single document, regulating learning, teaching and assessment processes in the university. The section on assessment is 2.5 pages long. The policy is descriptive, highlighting the assessment timeline and the process for appeals. The document also confirms the academics' ownership over their practices, non-anonymised assessment process and the use of marking scale A to F or pass/fail categories.

Method and participants

Three focus groups were carried out as part of this study: one in the UK and two in Estonia during the academic year 2014/15. The focus group in the UK university included three undergraduate (UG) and two postgraduate (PG) students, and the two focus groups in the Estonian University included six students (4 UG and 2 PG) and four students (2 UG and 2 PG) respectively. Due to standard ethical practice in the UK University, I was not allowed to use mailing lists for participant recruitment. Alternative methods (e.g. emailing student representatives and student clubs, advertising through posters and programme leaders), however, resulted in only five participants over five months research period. Unlike some other disciplinary areas (e.g. Psychology), this research did not offer any incentives to participants and this might have caused students' low participation. In order to accommodate all volunteers in both institutions, the composition of focus groups required flexibility in terms of size and

[2] The Republic of Estonia gained independence from Soviet Union in 1991 and joined the European Union in 2004. The population of Estonia is approximately 1.3 million people.

programme levels. Each focus group lasted about 1.5 hours and was moderated by the researcher.

Participants were from a wide range of disciplinary areas; however, only one student volunteered from the disciplinary area of the Arts and Humanities. Most participants were female: the UK study included one and the Estonian focus group two male students. While the sample size does not permit any generalisation about disciplinary and/or study level differences, when such differences emerge, the findings will emphasise the students' background. The main focus of this exploratory study was on the two institutional settings. Future research with a more targeted focus on students' background would be essential to understand disciplinary and/or study level differences.

Focus group questions were informed by a Foucauldian (1982) perspective on student subjectivity that is discursively constructed. The questions addressed the following thematic areas:

- students' higher education choices;
- understandings of the assessment purposes;
- experiences of assessment practices;
- opportunities to negotiate assessment practices.

The key analytic focus in this study is on discourse which from a Foucauldian perspective can be understood as a postmodern concern with how language produces particular subjects (Graham 2011). Discourse is therefore a term that not only applies to policy that produces particular understandings of students as consumers (as argued earlier in this article) but to student interviews which also have an effect on students' understanding of themselves within the dominant policy structures. The study borrowed practical tools from Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model of discourse analysis. As I have argued elsewhere (see Raaper 2017b), I find Fairclough's approach to discourse complementing Foucault's work. Fairclough (1992) explains discourse as a form of social practice, which constitutes social entities, relations and subjects. Fairclough's critical discourse analysis is therefore a dialectical method, making it possible to explore the relations between discourse and social practices and subjects (Fairclough 2001).

Each interview transcript was approached as discursive artefact and analysed in a spreadsheet format as a text, a discursive practice and a social practice (Fairclough 1992, 2001). Firstly, the textual analysis focused on examining textual structure in terms of vocabulary, metaphors and grammar used by student participants. Secondly, the interpretative analysis of discursive practice focused on the ways in which the text relates to other discourses/texts (e.g. dominant policies), and how different influences might be incorporated into the specific discourse (Fairclough 2003). Finally, the analysis of discourse as a social practice questioned how the students' accounts (discourses in this study) operate in the world (Fairclough 2001). My particular interest here was targeted towards power relations relating to the discourses and how student subjectivities emerge in assessment situations.

These three stages of analysis overlapped in practice, and were used to deconstruct the student discourses and to trace the ways in which students position themselves in higher education and assessment situations. By breaking down the student discourses into different Faircloughian stages, the analysis provided a more nuanced way to explore the Foucauldian concept of subjectification and the practices of power as they are experienced in neoliberal assessment contexts. For example, the linguistic aspects related to vocabulary reflected the students' economic understanding of higher education and assessment processes, indicating some neoliberal influence on their subjectivity. In other words, linguistic focus became a resource for the author when tracing the Foucauldian processes. The findings presented in this article are therefore structured based on a Foucauldian perspective to the subject, starting with a macro context of social structures and shifting towards the micro experiences of how power gets negotiated at the individual level (Foucault 1982). The study was approved by the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, and data was de-identified by using pseudonyms.

Status, employability and students' higher education choices

Clear from participants' description of their universities was an early insight into economic discourses of higher education: UK participants from both UG and PG backgrounds described their university as '*top 50 in the world*' (Callum), '*prestigious*' (Chloe, Tracy), and '*elite*' (Tracy). These discursive accounts provide hints about the importance of league tables to student educational decisions (Naidoo and Williams 2015; Pritchard 2005). In contrast, no such reference to status appeared in Estonian students' focus groups; rather, they used words such as '*innovative*' (Merle, Karoliine) and '*creative*' (Greta, Karoliine). As Estonian universities are not represented in the top quartile of the world league tables, university rankings may not

affect students to the same extent. Lacking a long or elite history, the university can pride itself on a marketing strategy that privileges its sense of identity as a 'contemporary and dynamic university that has a reputation of being the most student-friendly university in Estonia'. While the participants' descriptions of their universities differ, both groups have still adopted the dominant marketing language characteristic of particular institutions: discourses that these universities use to compete at various national and global higher education markets (Allen 2011).

The ways in which students from the two universities spoke about their subject-related choices indicated even stronger similarities. For example, Callum reflected on his experience of changing his major based on employment prospects: '*not lots of people get jobs in Politics degrees, so I decided for Geography*'. Similarly, Tracy explained that her first degree in Sociology - '*a Mickey Mouse degree*' - as she now calls it, did not help her with finding a relevant job. She assigns monetary value to her education:

> *...when I went to university the first time, if you had a degree, you were guaranteed a job, you were guaranteed to start with 15 grand or above a year. It's absolute rubbish, I couldn't get a job in my field at all, you know, I ended up working in a supermarket and then trying to find out what I was going to do next...* (Tracy)

Estonian students were less specific in their examples but still problematised aspects of employability as the main value of higher education. Kerli emphasised that university education should develop '*logical thinking*' rather than '*pointless factual knowledge*', demonstrating a utilitarian approach to learning. In support, Markus argued that good grades do not provide advantage in the labour market:

> *Well, at today's labour market, if there's two people running for the same position, one has work experience, and the other one has a 'cum laude', then the one with the experience gets it. Yes, no one will care why you got that B or...* (Markus)

These views suggest that, despite historic and structural differences between the universities and study levels, students evaluate educational choices based on work-related prospects, reflecting a globally dominant situation where they are increasingly reluctant to choose programmes from which jobs are difficult to obtain (Peters and Olssen 2005). While disciplinary differences did not emerge from the analysis, I am aware that students from the Arts and Humanities could differ in their educational decisions. The only participant from the

Humanities background was a language student and her perspective to employability aligned with the mainstream view in this study: '*my field is languages, and it's connected to work practice*' (Kristiina).

I recognise that a desire for employability cannot be equalled with consumerism in higher education. The focus on employment prospects might have characterised students prior to major neoliberal reforms. Svensson and Wood (2007), however, argue that students' understanding of higher education as a preparation for work is increasingly enforced by contemporary service-based economies where job prospects are highly dependent on degrees. As highlighted earlier, students are often positioned as consumers - 'rational utility maximisers' (Olssen 2009, 445) - who need to make careful educational decisions while considering individual benefits associated with particular degree programmes (Hay and Kapitzke 2009). Like consumers buying a product, students are expected to enact their economic self-interest when evaluating universities and degree programmes. They are in a process of developing their competitiveness and therefore are expected to prioritise employment prospects when exercising choice (Canaan and Shumar 2008; Naidoo and Williams 2015). This Faircloughian (2003) interdiscursivity with economic discourses of higher education becomes further evident from the participants' perspectives to assessment purposes as will be discussed next.

Students' economic understanding of assessment purposes

Similar economic discourses characterised the participants' understanding of assessment which was explained as evaluating and comparing individual success. The PG students from the Estonian University explained assessment in relation to allocating bursaries and selecting students for qualifications:

> *…purely financial reasons, giving the grants and bursaries – who gets the funding, who doesn't, who graduates with a distinction, who doesn't – they need to be filtered.* (Annika)

> *I find it's creating comparison within university, between universities, within Estonia and abroad etc., so that ultimately we'd be able to, based on a standard, a yardstick, to analyse you and me.* (Greta)

> *Not everybody can be allowed to graduate…* (Liisa)

The discourses indicate the students' sense of assessment as a process enabling visibility of individual performance (Foucault 1975; Harman and McDowell 201; Manuel and Llamas 2006). While the reasoning amongst the UG students in both universities was more limited, it

still reflected a concern with selection aspects of assessment: '*otherwise it's just passing the subject for nothing more than your presence*' (Markus), and '*just testing, just to check how smart you are*' (Sophie). Selection processes through assessment might therefore contribute to students' overall experience of developing oneself as an economically minded competitive subject who sees good grades as necessary for promoting one's work prospects (Leach, Neutze, and Zepke 2000). For example, Tracy and Callum from the UK University highlight how assessment has played a crucial role in shaping their educational choices:

> *...I was actually majoring in Law, and I swapped for majoring in Sociology […] because it was after I had essays, I decided that assessment in Sociology is better for me…* (Tracy)

> *Politics always tends to have an essay equivalent to 30% of the mark, 10% goes to tutorial participation, and then the reminder goes to your overall exam, whereas Geography was so different, you know, it would be split down to very small fractions [...] say, well, if I do good at this, this and this, and not so well in this, I could still come for a good grade. So that's what I liked about Geography, and that's why I went on.* (Callum)

Elements of economic mind-set surface in two very different higher education environments, and provide an example of subjects who are fundamentally influenced by the social context they are part of, shaped by the 'walls of society' as portrayed by Butler (1997, 74). It appears that neoliberal higher education discourses provide 'a space of functioning' (Foucault 1972) for students and shape the ways in which they not only reason about the value of education but assessment. The students interviewed explained assessment as being necessary for comparing students and making individual achievement - or lack of it - visible. It is therefore unsurprising that some students (e.g. Tracy and Callum in this study) have become pragmatic about their educational decisions based on how certain assessment methods can benefit or disadvantage their performance in higher education.

Students' experiences of disciplinary power in assessment practice contexts

While the analysis did not reveal strong alignment with consumerist policy discourses where students would describe themselves as passive purchasers of education or so called private investors (Naidoo and Williams 2015), there were signs of economic mind-set in terms of employability. The participants explained their relationship with higher education as what Gourlay and Stevenson (2017, 391) would describe as a matter for 'private gain in terms of employability'.

Despite the similarities in students' accounts of higher education, their experiences of being assessed differed greatly in the two universities. Students from the UK emphasised constraining experiences of limited assessment methods due to restrictive regulations: what Murphy (2006) calls the professionalisation of assessment practices characteristic of neoliberal universities. This manifests as a sense of being continuously assessed: '*we are pushed to essays*' (Chloe), '*the essays we have done are based on the standard kind of marking grid*' (Tracy) and '*it's all multiple choice*' (Rachel), reflecting some disciplinary differences between the Social and Medical Sciences. Similarly, they highlighted academics' strictness with certain standards. Callum, for instance, argues that '*with Geography they are kind of like, they are really harsh I must admit*', and Sophie explains how academics in her courses are being strict with word limits which appear as if '*set in stone*'. The findings suggest that students sense the restrictive assessment policy context characteristic of neoliberal universities (Fanghanel 2012): they are normalised and surveilled (Foucault 1975) via particular assessment methods and standards. Unlike academics, however, who critique the regulations (Laughlin and Broadbent 1994; Raaper 2016), UG students have at most limited abilities to compare contexts, standards and regulations. They just perceive it as part of 'normal' assessment practices.

In contrast, assessment in the Estonian University is mostly practised by individual academics and not conducted anonymously, reflecting traditional trust in academic work (Mampaey and Huisman 2015). These structural differences along with student experiences of various assessment methods contribute to students' perception of assessors and themselves. Markus, for example, argues that '*there's no specific framework based on what students are assessed*' and that assessment is '*very relative*' in terms of individual academics and their preferences. Some students see academics adopting their own assessment policies:

> *Some academics, at least in Natural Sciences, set the best paper as the maximum or 100% and then deduct from that.* (Kerli)

> *...if, say, the academic feels, when we sit an assessment and many fail, and if the academic feels that they did not explain well enough what they expected of the student, they'll give them another chance...* (Marili)

The students in the Estonian University position academics as being powerful in terms of controlling assessment processes, and this relationship raises questions about academic bias (Bradley 1993). Phrases such as '*Yes, there's subjectivity in assessment*' (Karl), '*Clearly most*

academics don't manage to avoid marking by the face[3]‘ (Kerli), and ‘*Sure, there are academics – like we heard – who don't mark very well*’ (Marili) were common among both study levels. Assessment in the Estonian University compared to its UK counterpart, is under-regulated and does not rely on anonymity: academics know the authors of the assessed works. Kerli even argues that academics develop their opinions during their various encounters with students:

> *…if you're thought of well, if you're above the average and have been noticed through the years, your grades are better, and if you have been slacking and haven't done well enough, then also later you get assessed worse in relatively subjective situations.* (Kerli)

This experience of assessment being relational, and depending on dynamics between the individual assessor and assessed was absent from the UK students’ discourses. Rather, assessment power relations for these students exist in various ‘networks of social’ (Foucault 1983, 372). For example, the participants explained how assessment is increasingly divided between marking teams of varying academic status such as academics, tutors and graduate teaching assistants who may all have had an input to teaching. The NSS, every year, highlights the importance of assessment and feedback and universities manage this by co-opting a range of sometimes marginal staff in pursuit of improving timely feedback practices. Tracy, for example, is concerned by the ways marking teams operate in large programmes:

> *And obviously they are all marking with the same criteria but then specialism kind of intervenes as well. For example, people who are marked by language tutors tended to get marked down for grammar and things like that and structure, emm whereas I think people who are marked by maybe Maths specialists or other things, are maybe more kind of focused on the content.* (Tracy)

Tracy’s example above reflects her experience of assessors who act as part of marking teams and who - despite the standards - can still differ in their practices. Furthermore, Chloe explains how marking teams mediate their biases by becoming protective against student queries:

> *...obviously teachers as well might want to...keep things like...they don’t want to say anything wrong about other, like a colleague [...] as a student you get the feeling like that it’s you against them in a way, you are not going to win because they are going to be altogether.* (Chloe)

[3] The word “face” is often used in Estonian language to refer to subjective judgment (e.g. favouring someone based on their visible characteristics).

Despite the UK students' understanding of assessment as a highly standardised process, relying on a limited number of methods, they still see disciplinary power underpinning the process. However, this power is mediated within marking teams, as assessment in the UK is no longer the domain of a single academic (Leach, Neutze and Zepke 2000) but belongs to the complex field of regulations and marking teams that students have little access to. Chloe's quote demonstrates the ways students might want to appeal when they notice inconsistency of standards across the team but feel unable to act against academic collegiality. While the Estonian students emphasised academic bias in assessment, they also explained it in terms of traditional authority in which academics not only assess student performance but their overall behaviour and being in the university (a student's '*face*'). Assessment as a normalising technology and a domain of the teacher (Foucault 1975) might not only motivate students to perform in particular ways but also to display certain character traits. Also, their sense of wanting to appeal against academic judgements was less evident. It might be because the students from the Estonian university are used to academic authority in assessment and difference in practise: there is no 'professionalised' framework (Murphy 2002) to be constrained by or to act against.

Negotiation of disciplinary power in assessment practice contexts

Further differences emerge when tracing the ways in which the participants respond to assessment power dynamics in the two universities. In line with their constraining experiences of assessment regulations and marking teams, students from the UK University express negative emotions such as '*panic*' (Chloe, Callum), '*fear*' (Chloe), '*freak-out*' (Sophie), '*stress*' (Rachel) and '*nightmare*' (Callum). These emotions provide an impression of students as fearful and needing to perform in a 'right' way: power from a Foucauldian perspective is always productive (Foucault 1983), making people act and respond in particular ways. The examples below illustrate how the students became strategic in learning and assessment processes:

> *I have now learned to think that for every hundred words in an essay if I'm not quoting somebody or mentioned somebody, I've got something wrong here.* (Callum)

> *I was reading my friend's essay, she was in Archaeology, she was talking about buildings, she had put her opinion in it, she had so many 'I-s', and I was like what is this...it's not correct.* (Rachel)

A neoliberalised UK assessment system that has shifted power from academic judgment to regulations might make students both highly cautious but also strategic in their study processes, especially in terms of referencing, note taking, and expressing one's opinion. As soon as their understanding of the 'right' way of doing things is threatened by ambiguous instructions, confidence may be undermined leading to a feeling of vulnerability in assessment, hence the negative emotions associated with assessment. Students want to perform well, but standardised assessment practices and protective marking teams constrain their opportunities to affect assessment processes. Unlike the traditional understanding of assessment as the domain of a single assessor (Leach, Neutze, and Zepke 2000), the UK students need to cope with a diffused assessment context where regulations, individual characteristics of assessors and collegiality make power relations difficult to comprehend. Diffuse power, however, is essential to neoliberal institutions, helping to enforce responsibility and self-government (Foucault 2004) and resulting in strategically minded subjects as evident from the quotes above.

Unlike their counterparts in the UK, the UG and PG students from Estonia did not perceive themselves as utterly constrained by assessment or assessors; rather, they described themselves as being aware of and proactive in manoeuvring within existing power relations. Their key strategy relies on creating a good impression of themselves that would affect academics' assessment decisions. They want to become 'the good student' (Grant 1997, 106). For example, Markus argues that '*only after the first assignment you'll know what kind of academic you're dealing with, how you should do your work for them*', and Liisa emphasises that '*as I've been studying here for five years, I know practically all academics pretty well, and they know what to expect of whom*'. This idea of '*knowing*' academics and doing '*work for them*' increases over the study years and helps students to shape their behaviour in order to enhance their chances for success. This also reflects how the Estonian students are having their behaviour shaped by the system in which assessment is highly controlled by academics without any form of student anonymity. However, this clear disciplinary power between assessor and assessed does not necessarily make students passive subjects as literature has suggested (Tan 2004; Taras 2008): they are able to reverse the power and make it work for their own advantage. Students could be seen practising their entrepreneurial mind-set within the university setting (Hay and Kapitzke 2009).

Findings from both universities demonstrate a Foucauldian notion of power that is never owned by a single person but rather exists in various networks and can be exercised only so far as the

subjects are free to choose actions within a field of possibilities (Dean 2013; Foucault 1982). Adopting a strategic approach or creating a good impression of oneself seem to be possibilities that students choose to negotiate subjectivities in assessment situations. Their response to disciplinary power is therefore contextual, depending on assessment systems and opportunities available to them.

Concluding thoughts

When probing beyond simplistic measures like the NSS assessment and feedback scores characteristic of the UK higher education sector, it becomes evident that the changing discourse around the nature of higher education impacts student behaviours. From this study, it is clear that there is evidence of neoliberal influences on student understanding of higher education and assessment processes. The students from both universities exercise educational choices in the higher education market as Pritchard (2005) described, and they are interested in university education for promoting their competitiveness in the labour market (Canaan and Shumar 2008; Naidoo and Williams 2015). Furthermore, the students ascribed economic value to assessment as an institutional technology of selection and reward: a way to promote one's competitiveness. While these findings do not suggest that students are necessarily consumers as portrayed in dominant policy discourses, they indicate some neoliberal influence on students' understanding of themselves and their place in university. The functionality of education in terms of needing to secure employment has become prevalent in neoliberal societies (Naidoo and Williams 2015; Peters and Olssen 2005). However, the study also exposed that this economic mind-set was less evident in the practice context of assessment, in the relationship between assessor(s) and assessed where either codified regulation (UK) or potential for academic bias (Estonia) exist. It is clear that students in assessment situations cannot and do not position themselves as 'homo economicus' in a Foucauldian sense, acting as 'a free and autonomous 'atom' of self-interest' (Hamann 2009, 37). They are shaped by disciplinary power: whether the traditional domination of a single assessor or more diffuse power contexts in the UK.

Interestingly, however, students interviewed are not passive subjects within this power imbalance, but find ways to negotiate assessment dynamics. In the Estonian University, where the assessment system is still based on liberal ideas of academic authority and freedom, students identify assessors' power and their opportunities for manoeuvre: they make use of the ways assessment – so called '*face-based assessment*' (Kerli) – acts on them. In more regulated setting like the UK, the disciplinary technology has become more diffuse and students struggle to

identify the cause of the pressure they feel: they speak about standards and academic protectiveness. Their response to these constraints results in their becoming strategic learners. However, the tactical ways in which students understand and respond to these power relations might reflect the wider impacts of neoliberalism and increasingly promoted consumerist attitudes which expect individuals to maximise their potential for success. It should be a concern to all in higher education to recognise this changing relationship between student subjectivities, their understandings of education and behaviour.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Dr Jan Smith for her time and generous feedback on this paper. I am also highly grateful to Dr Fiona Patrick for her support during my research project.

References

Allen, A. 2011. 'The Idea of a World University: Can Foucauldian Research Offer a Vision of Educational Futures?' *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 19 (3): 367-383. doi: 10.1080/14681366.2011.607840.

Bansel, P. 2014. 'The Subject of Policy.' *Critical Studies in Education* 56 (1): 5–20. doi: 10.1080/17508487.2015.971839.

Barnett, R. 2011. '*Being a University*.' Oxon: Routledge.

Becker, H. S., B. Geer, and E. Hughes. 1968. *Making the Grade. The Academic Side of College Life*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Besley, T., and M. A. Peters. 2007. *Subjectivity and Truth. Foucault, Education and the Culture of Self*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Bloxham, S., P. Boyd, and S. Orr. 2011. 'Mark My Words: The Role of Assessment Criteria in UK Higher Education Grading Practices.' *Studies in Higher Education* 36 (6): 655-670. doi: 10.1080/03075071003777716.

Bradley, C. 1993. 'Sex Bias in Student Assessment Overlooked?' *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 18 (1): 3-8. doi: 10.1080/0260293930180101

Butler, J. 1997. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Canaan, J. E., and W. Shumar. 2008. 'Higher Education in the Era of Globalization and Neoliberalism.' In *Structure and Agency in the Neoliberal University*, edited by J. E. Canaan, and W. Shumar, 1-30. New York: Routledge.

Competition and Markets Authority. 2015. 'Higher Education Providers: Consumer Law. 60-Second Summary.' Accessed 9 February 2018. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/411392/HE_providers_60ss.pdf

Dean, M. 2013. *The Signature of Power. Sovereignty, Governmentality and Biopolitics*. London: Sage Publications.

ENQA. 2009. 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.' Accessed March 20 2016. http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/ESG_3edition-2.pdf

Evans, A. M. 2011. 'Governing Student Assessment: Administrative Rules, Silenced Academics and Performing Students.' *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 36 (2): 213-223. doi: 10.1080/02602930903277727.

Fanghanel, J. 2012. *Being an Academic*. London: Routledge.

Fairclough, N. 1992. *Discourse and Social Change.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Fairclough, N. 2001. *Language and Power*. 2nd ed. Essex: Pearson Education Limited.

Fairclough, N. 2003. *Analysing Discourse. Textual Analysis for Social Research.* London: Routledge.

Foucault, M. 1972. 'History, Discourse and Discontinuity.' *Salmagundi* 2: 225-248.

Foucault, M. 1973. 'Truth and Juridical Forms.' In *Power. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, edited by J. D. Faubion, 1-89. London: Penguin Group.

Foucault, M. 1975. *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. London: Penguin Group.

Foucault, M. 1982. 'The Subject and Power.' In *Power. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, edited by J. D. Faubion, 326-348. London: Penguin Group.

Foucault, M. 1983. 'The Risks of Security.' In *Power. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, edited by J. D. Faubion, 365-381. London: Penguin Group.

Foucault, M. 1984. ‘The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom.’ In *Ethics. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, edited by P. Rabinow, 281-301. London: Penguin Group.

Foucault, M. 2004. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-1979*. New York: Picador USA.

Gipps, C. 1999. ‘Socio-Cultural Aspects of Assessment.’ *Review of Research in Education* 24: 355-392.

Gourlay, L., and J. Stevenson. 2017. ‘Teaching Excellence in Higher Education: Critical Perspectives.’ *Teaching in Higher Education* 22 (4): 391-395. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2017.1304632.

Graham, L. J. 2011. ‘The Product of Text and "Other" Statements: Discourse Analysis and the Critical Use of Foucault.’ *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 43 (6): 663-674. doi: 10.1111/j.1469-5812.2010.00698.x.

Grant, B. 1997. ‘Disciplining Students: The Construction of Student Subjectivities.’ *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 18 (1): 101-114. doi: 10.1111/j.1469-5812.2010.00698.x.

Hamann, T. H. 2009. ‘Neoliberalism, Governmentality, and Ethics.’ *Foucault Studies* 6: 37-59.

Harman, K., and L. McDowell. 2011. ‘Assessment Talk in Design: The Multiple Purposes of Assessment in HE.’ *Teaching in Higher Education* 16 (1): 41-52. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2010.507309.

Hay, S., and C. Kapitzke. 2009. ‘'Smart State' for a Knowledge Economy: Reconstituting Creativity through Student Subjectivity.’ *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 30 (2): 151-164. doi: 10.1080/01425690802700206.

Jankowski, N., and S. Provezis. 2014. ‘Neoliberal Ideologies, Governmentality and the Academy: An Examination of Accountability through Assessment and Transparency.’ *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 46 (5): 475-487. doi: 10.1080/00131857.2012.721736.

Laughlin, R., and J. Broadbent. 1994. ‘The Managerial Reform of Health and Education in the UK: Value for Money or a Devaluing Process.’ *The Political Quarterly* 65 (2): 152-167. doi:10.1111/j.1467-923X.1994.tb00442.x.

Leach, L., G. Neutze, and N. Zepke. 2000. ‘Learners' Perceptions of Assessment: Tensions between Philosophy and Practice.’ *Studies in the Education of Adults* 32 (1): 107-119. doi: 10.1080/02660830.2000.11661424.

Lehn-Christiansen, S. 2011. ‘Health Promotion Viewed as Processes of Subjectification in the Education of Danish Social and Healthcare Workers.’ *Journal of Social Work Practice: Psychotherapeutic Approaches in Health, Welfare and the Community* 25(3): 311–322. doi: 10.1080/02650533.2011.597178.

Mampaey, J., and J. Huisman. 2015. ‘Defensive Stakeholder Management in European Universities: An Institutional Logics Perspective.’ *Studies in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2015.1029904.

Manuel, J., and C. Llamas. 2006. ‘Technologies of Disciplinary Power in Action: The Norm of the 'Good Student'.’ *Higher Education* 52 (4): 665-686. doi: 10.1007/s10734-004-1449-1.

Morris, D. 2017. ‘Be It Enacted: The Higher Education and Research Act (2017).’ *Wonkhe.* Accessed 9 Ferbuary 2018. http://wonkhe.com/blogs/be-it-enacted-the-higher-education-and-research-act-2017/

Murphy, R. 2006. ‘Evaluating New Priorities for Assessment in Higher Education.’ In *Innovative Assessment in Higher Education*, edited by C. Bryan, and K. Clegg, 37-47. Oxon: Routledge.

Naidoo, R., and J. Williams. 2015. ‘The Neoliberal Regime in English Higher Education: Charters, Consumers and the Erosion of the Public Good.’ *Critical Studies in Education* 56 (2): 208-223. doi: 10.1080/17508487.2014.939098.

Olssen, M. 2009. ‘Neoliberalism, Education, and the Rise of a Global Common Good.’ In *Re-Reading Education Policy. A Handbook Studying the Policy Agenda of the 21st Century*, edited by M. Simons, M. Olssen, and M. A. Peters, 433-457. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Peters, M. A., and M. Olssen. 2005. ‘'Useful Knowledge': Redefining Research and Teaching in the Learning Economy.’ In *Reshaping the University. New Relationships between Research, Scholarship and Teaching*, edited by R. Barnett, 37-48. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Pritchard, R. 2005. ‘Education Staff and Students under Neoliberal Pressure: A British-German Comparison.’ *Beiträge zur Hochschulforschung* 4 (27): 6-29.

Raaper, R. 2016. ‘Academic Perceptions of Higher Education Assessment Processes in Neoliberal Academia.’ *Critical Studies in Education* 57 (2): 175-190. doi: 10.1080/17508487.2015.1019901.

Raaper, R. 2017a. ‘Tracing Assessment Policy Discourses in Neoliberalised Higher Education Settings.’ *Journal of Education Policy* 32(3): 322-339. doi: 10.1080/02680939.2016.1257160.

Raaper, R. 2017b. ‘Discourse Analysis of Assessment Policies in Higher Education: a Foucauldian Approach.’ *SAGE Research Methods Cases*. doi: 10.4135/9781473975019.

Reynolds, M., and K. Trehan. 2000. ‘Assessment: A Critical Perspective.’ *Studies in Higher Education* 25 (3): 267-278. doi: 10.1080/03075070050193406.

Saar, E., and R. Mõttus. 2013. ‘Foreword.’ In *Higher education at a Crossroad: The Case of Estonia*, edited by E. Saar, and R. Mõttus, 9-10. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.

Svensson, G., and G. Wood. 2007. ‘Are University Students Really Customers? When Illusion May Lead to Delusion for All!’ *International Journal of Educational Management* 21 (1): 17-28. doi: 10.1108/09513540710716795.

Tan, K. 2004. ‘Does Student Self-Assessment Empower or Discipline Students?’ *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 29 (6): 651-662. doi: 10.1080/0260293042000227209.

Taras, M. 2008. ‘Issues of Power and Equity in Two Models of Self-Assessment.’ *Teaching in Higher Education* 13 (1): 81-92. doi: 10.1080/13562510701794076.

Tomusk, V. 1996. ‘Recent Trend in Estonian Higher Education: Emergence of the Binary Division from the Point of View of Staff Development.’ *Minerva* 34: 279-289.

Universities UK. 2017. ‘Education, Consumer Rights and Maintaining Trust: What Students Want From Their University.’ Accessed February 9 2018. http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and analysis/reports/Documents/2017/education-consumer-rights-maintaining-trust-web.pdf

Unt, M. and K. Lindemann. 2013. ‘From Bust to Boom and Back Again: Social Positions of Graduates During the Last Decade in Estonia.’ In *Higher Education at a Crossroad: the Case of Estonia*, by E. Saar, and R. Mõttus, 307-338. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.

Yorke, M. 2008. *Grading Student Achievement in Higher Education. Signals and Shortcomings*. Oxon: Routledge.